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MILITARY ASSISTANCE ADVISORY GROUP, VIETNAM
APO 143, San Francisco, California

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MACAR-OT (S&A)

12 Mar 64


SUBJECT: Lessons Learned Number 38: Area Saturation Operations (U)

TO: See Distribution

1. (U) Attached as Inclosure 1 is the latest "Lessons Learned" from counterinsurgency operations in the Republic of Vietnam.
2. (U) The information contained in "Lessons Learned" is primarily intended for use by US Advisors in Vietnam. Lessons may be of value for direct application, or they may simply reinforce existing tactics, techniques, or doctrine.
3. (CMHA) This document is classified CONFIDENTIAL to permit freedom of expression and careful analysis of operational methods and tactics of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, to protect US advisor-counterpart relations and to deny any possible use by insurgent forces. Special handling is required under the applicable provisions of DA-DCMI(A) when released to friendly nations. Release to personnel of the Republic of Vietnam will be governed by the provisions of MACV Memo 6, 13 Oct 62 and MAAG Memo 380-4, 14 Nov 63. Sanitized versions of this information omitting dates, names of locations and participating personnel and units may be prepared for instructional purposes and/or official US Army publications.
4. (U) Comments, questions and requests for changes in distribution should be addressed to this headquarters, ATTN: O&T Division, USAFEC.

FOR THE CHIEF:

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ROBERT R. PALDA
Lt Col, AGC
Adjutant

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1. (U) INTRODUCTION: This issue of "Lessons Learned" is devoted to "Area Saturation Operations", a tactical concept of area search which employs a system of extensive combat patrolling in enemy controlled areas in the Republic of Vietnam. Specific operations which have been conducted by elements of the 2d Infantry Division, Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) have been selected to illustrate successful tactics and techniques employed.

2. (CMHA) BACKGROUND:

a. Definition. An "Area Saturation Operation", is basically a method of searching and clearing an area by the use of continuous and extensive patrolling, designed to generate contact with the Viet Cong (VC) in order to kill or capture him. It is a thorough search technique utilized in search and clear and clear and hold operations.

b. General. The current ARVN concept of repeatedly employing conventional attacks as search and clear operations has not proved to be a completely successful tactic against the VC. The VC either disperse or merely move aside from the attacking forces. Having evaded or infiltrated ARVN forces, the VC then harass the troops as snipers, or regroup to attack hamlets, outposts or villages. Moreover, these conventional operations are many times based on intelligence which is untimely, unreliable or inadequate. These operations generally are conducted in support of hamlets, Districts, Province, and Governmental immediate and special needs, rather than in accordance with any general plan or pattern. The attacks are essentially a show-of-force, rather than counterinsurgency combat actions. Consequently they are generally unproductive in terms of enemy contact and VC kills. Friendly forces must locate the VC before they can employ offensive operations (fix and destroy operations) in order to destroy him. The most effective method of locating the enemy is through area saturation operations which are conducted in areas under VC control.

c. In the area in which they are used area saturation operations constitute one phase of the area's pacification plan. The overall pacification plan includes three phases: (1) Army of the Republic of Vietnam

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conduct area saturation operations in a specific area until the VC are destroyed or captured; (2) the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps move into the cleared area maintaining continuous surveillance of the area through extensive patrolling; (3) once the area is completely under government control the local population assumes responsibility for maintaining their own security.

3. (CMHA) AREA SATURATION OPERATIONS:

a. Concept of Operations. Area saturation operations are characterized by decentralized, platoon-sized patrols conducted continuously day and night in an area controlled by the VC. These patrol actions are employed by the use of: reconnaissance patrols to locate VC units and bases; combat patrols and raids against known or suspected VC bases, installations, patrols and outposts; "Eagle" flights or aerial hunter-killer teams; ambushes; mining probable VC routes of communications; and continuous aerial surveillance. Once the location of a sizeable VC force is known, fix and destroy operations are initiated against the VC.

b. Principles of Operations.

(1) Key features of these operations or area saturation tactics are: (1) extensive platoon level combat patrols, two-thirds of which are conducted at night; (2) a scheduled changing of areas by companies and/or battalions so that new areas overlap old ones, and troops return at intervals to areas they have previously patrolled; and (3) lightly equipped patrols. (Combat packs and other equipment are left at company combat bases); (4) patrols moving simultaneously on many axes in a large area, resulting in a greater number of meeting engagements; (5) patrols preventing the VC from regrouping for offensive action.

(2) Area saturation tactics deny the VC free access to all areas. The concept is not necessarily to kill every VC but to create an environment which is too unhealthy for him. Area saturation relentless patrol actions either kill or capture the VC, cause him to defect or to cease operating in an area.

(3) This concept of searching, clearing and holding an area by persistent night operations has resulted in a reduction in friendly casualties caused by snipers and mines. Daytime operations are reduced in favor of accelerated night operations during which VC sniper observation is limited. Friendly forces can move at night with greater freedom from mines, since the VC take up their mines to permit their own movement at night. This advantage pays great dividends by a noticeable amelioration of troop morale.

(4) The initiative is obtained and held in area saturation tactics far more effectively than through the use of rapid reaction forces which are in themselves an admission that the enemy can do what he pleases and friendly forces must react to his action.

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against the enemy. If the rifle company committed units and organic weapons are not sufficient, the battalion reaction force is available to assist. The enemy should be destroyed primarily with organic weapons (rifles, grenades, machine guns, automatic weapons, and mortars). Artillery and airpower should be available and should be requested when needed. However, these means should not be considered substitutes for closing with and destroying the enemy by fire and maneuver.

2. The patrols must travel light. Platoons on patrol should leave all unnecessary equipment, rations, packs, heavy weapons, excess ammunition, steel helmets, etc., at the company base. Carrying the assault ration of rice balls and canned fish can remove the requirement for heavy and noisy cooking equipment and raw rations. Although the conduct of area saturation tactics is based on decentralized planning and execution the company commander should accompany patrols periodically to ascertain how well the platoons are executing the company plan. Mission type orders are issued to the company commander. These orders include the area to be patrolled, time allocated to patrol the area, and resupply instructions. The detailed planning and execution of the patrolling is left up to the company commander.

3. Area and point ambushes are employed within the company operational area where feasible.

4. A typical battalion area containing three company areas which are patrolled on D day and D + 1, is shown at Inclosure 2. The battalion combat base is located with one of the rifle company patrol bases. The intervals between the rifle companies are covered with harassing and interdiction (H&I) mortar and artillery concentrations. Each of these rifle company areas of responsibility will be patrolled as shown at Inclosure 1. As the VC attempt to evade the company patrols by moving out of the area, they may be confronted with the (H&I) fires.

5. The battalion combat base is the resupply point for the rifle companies. The attached 81mm mortar platoon is located in the battalion combat base, with the mortar forward observers attached to the companies. If the terrain and situation permit, the battalion combat base should be moved as the companies move their patrol bases. If a hamlet is in the area, the battalion base should be located in or near the hamlet, so concurrent psychological warfare and civic action missions can be accomplished. Battalion combat bases and company patrol bases, if possible, should construct a suitable helipad for medical evacuation and for resupply if ground transportation is restricted. Resupply normally is on a three day cycle, therefore, all units must carry three days rations. The battalion maintains five additional days rations for the companies.

(b) Second Phase, D + 2 through D + 4. The rifle companies assemble and depart the first area and move to their new areas of responsibility. Inclosure 3 portrays how this is accomplished.

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(5) In most operational areas in VN, waging a platoon level war is feasible in order to ferret out the enemy to destroy him. Area saturation tactics, consisting of systematized combat patrols at the platoon level are more profitable with less loss to friendly troops than maneuvers such as encirclements and hammer and anvil operations. However, a unit engaged in area saturation has the capability to assemble and attack in company and battalion strength when required. Before embarking on a large maneuver, a unit should first establish contact with the VC by area saturation. Friendly forces must wage the same kind of war the VC conducts; then the advantages friendly forces possess in superior communications, logistics, mobility and equipment can make themselves felt. If the VC masses, friendly forces can use artillery and air power to gain the advantage. Until the VC does mass, helicopters, bombers, artillery and armored vehicles do not give friendly forces a great advantage.

c. Conduct of Operations.

(1) Area organization. A battalion assigned an area saturation mission (for discussion purposes a battalion sized operation is used in this instance) is normally assigned a specific area of responsibility. The size of the area is dependent upon the mission, the nature of the terrain and the VC forces and the friendly troops available. The battalion commander assigns areas of responsibility to the rifle companies normally retaining a minimum of a platoon as the battalion reaction force. In some areas in Vietnam where the VC operate in not more than platoon size forces, a battalion reaction force is not necessary. In such cases the battalion can assemble a reaction force when required to do so by concentrating platoons or companies.

(2) Sequence of operations. A series of schematics which represent a visualization of how area saturation tactics are applied, are at Inclosures 1 through 7.

(a) First Phase D day and D + 1.

1. The size of the company area assigned can vary between 7 and 48 square kilometers, depending on the nature of the terrain. A typical rifle company area is shown at Inclosure 1. Near the center is the rifle company patrol base. On the day prior to the beginning of the operation, the rifle company moves to, secures and occupies the company patrol base, carrying three days' rations. The company assigned area is patrolled for a 48 hour period (D day and D + 1) by employing two patrols during the day, and four night patrols, for a total of six patrols. Patrols normally consist of one rifle platoon each. None of the patrols is made over the same route. An ARVN rifle platoon has sufficient firepower to fight most VC elements it is likely to encounter. If a larger VC unit is contacted, the company commander can maneuver his other platoons

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the control of the VC for the purpose of locating and forcing the VC to consolidate, in order to destroy him, or to cause him to cease operations.

c. Area saturation tactics deny the VC free access to all areas within the area of operation.

d. Persistent and frequent night operations result in a reduction in friendly casualties suffered from snipers and mines.

e. The size of the area assigned a rifle company in area saturation operations will vary between 7 and 48 square kilometers, depending on the nature of the terrain.

f. Patrolling simultaneously on many axes in a large area, results in a greater number of meeting engagements with the VC.

g. Artillery and airpower should be available but should not be relied upon as substitutes for the capability of organic weapons and maneuver to destroy the enemy.

h. Platoons on patrol travel as light as possible and should leave all unnecessary equipment at the company combat base.

i. Battalion and company units conducting area saturation operations should perform concurrent psywar/civic action mission.

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Brigadier General, USA
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1. H&I fires are lifted during the adjustment of assigned areas. Each company obtains 3 days rations before moving to its new patrol base. Platoons move over multiple routes to the new patrol base. The company moving to the battalion combat base can be resupplied at the new location. Companies move by way of the battalion base for resupply or dispatch one platoon as a carrying party to the battalion base. The rifle companies move, resupply and organize their new patrol bases on D + 2. If possible the resupply and issuance of orders can be made by helicopter to the rifle companies.

2. On D + 3 and D + 4, the new company areas of responsibility are patrolled as shown at Inclosure 1. Old and new areas of responsibility are overlapped and H&I fires are used in the intervals between rifle companies. Units must maintain strict security and be alert for increased VC contact during movement from area to area.

(c) Third Phase, D + 5 through D + 16. The move from the second phase to the third phase is made on D + 5, and the final company areas are patrolled on D + 6 and D + 7. The patrol routes always overlap insuring complete coverage of all areas. H&I fires are used as before in the intervals between companies. Inclosure 4, contains a schematic showing the beginning of the third phase at the battalion level. Inclosure 5, portrays the completed coverage of a battalion area at the end of D + 7, or 9 days of operation. As shown in the schematic, the coverage of the entire battalion area of responsibility is very thorough.

(d) Task Force Operation. A task force employing the area saturation technique from D day through D + 7 is shown at Inclosures 6 and 7. A task force consisting of two battalions assigns areas of responsibility to each battalion. These battalion areas will be patrolled as discussed above. The battalions move to new areas on D + 8, then from D + 9 through D + 16 patrolling is repeated in the new areas. In approximately 18 days the area is saturated by platoon sized patrols moving in different directions at varying times.

(e) Area saturation places severe physical demands on all individuals, but if properly executed, this type tactic will pay off in increased contact with the VC.

(f) For a detailed discussion of these operations, see FM 31-16, "Counter guerrilla Operations".

4. (CMHA) LESSONS LEARNED:

a. Application of the area saturation tactics permits ARVN to take the initiative away from the VC.

b. Area saturation operations should be conducted in areas under

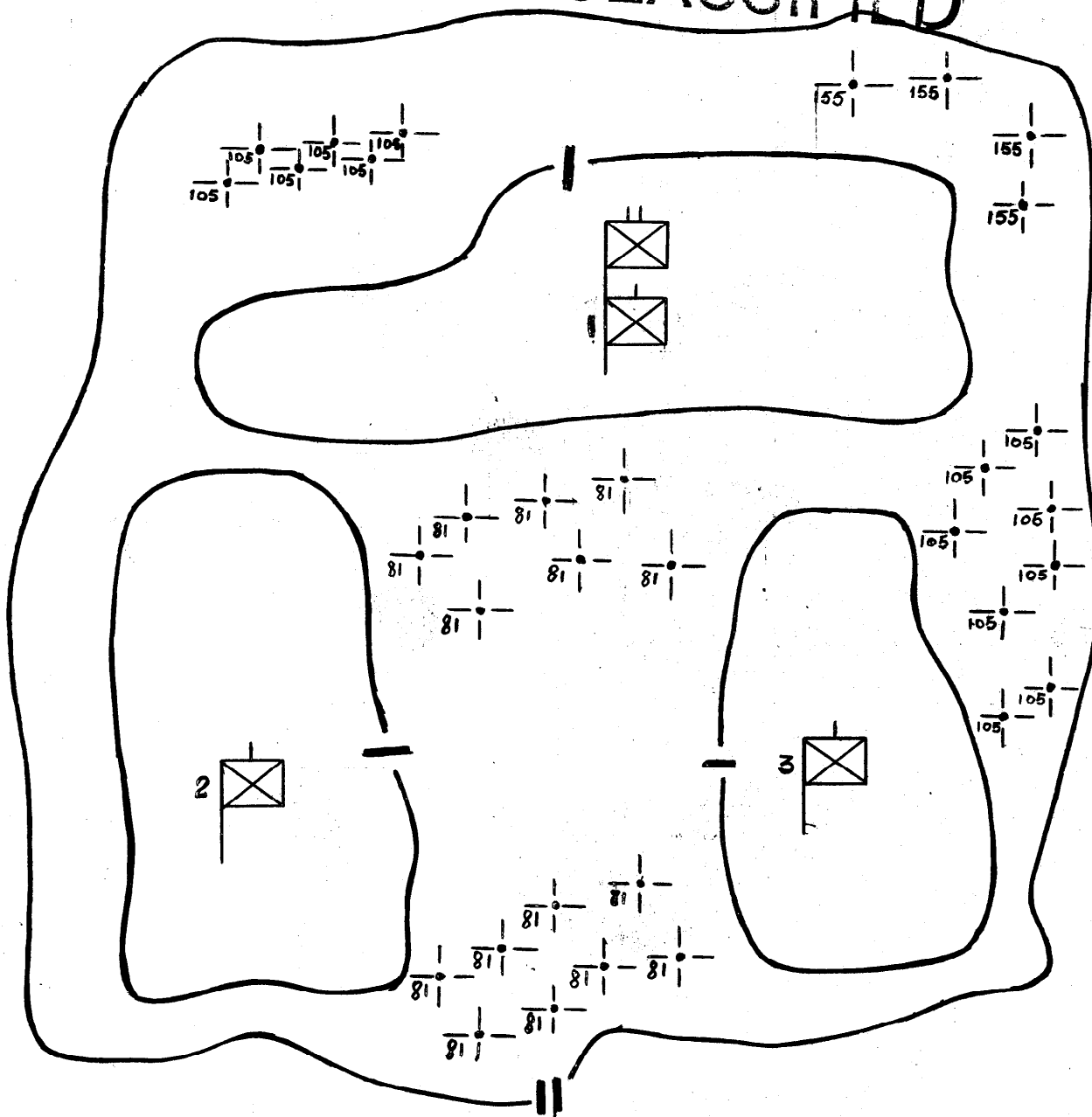
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BATTALION DISPERSES TO OPERATE

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D-1: Move to the zone of action.

D and D+1: Disperse for searching.

— · — Pre-planned H & I Fires.

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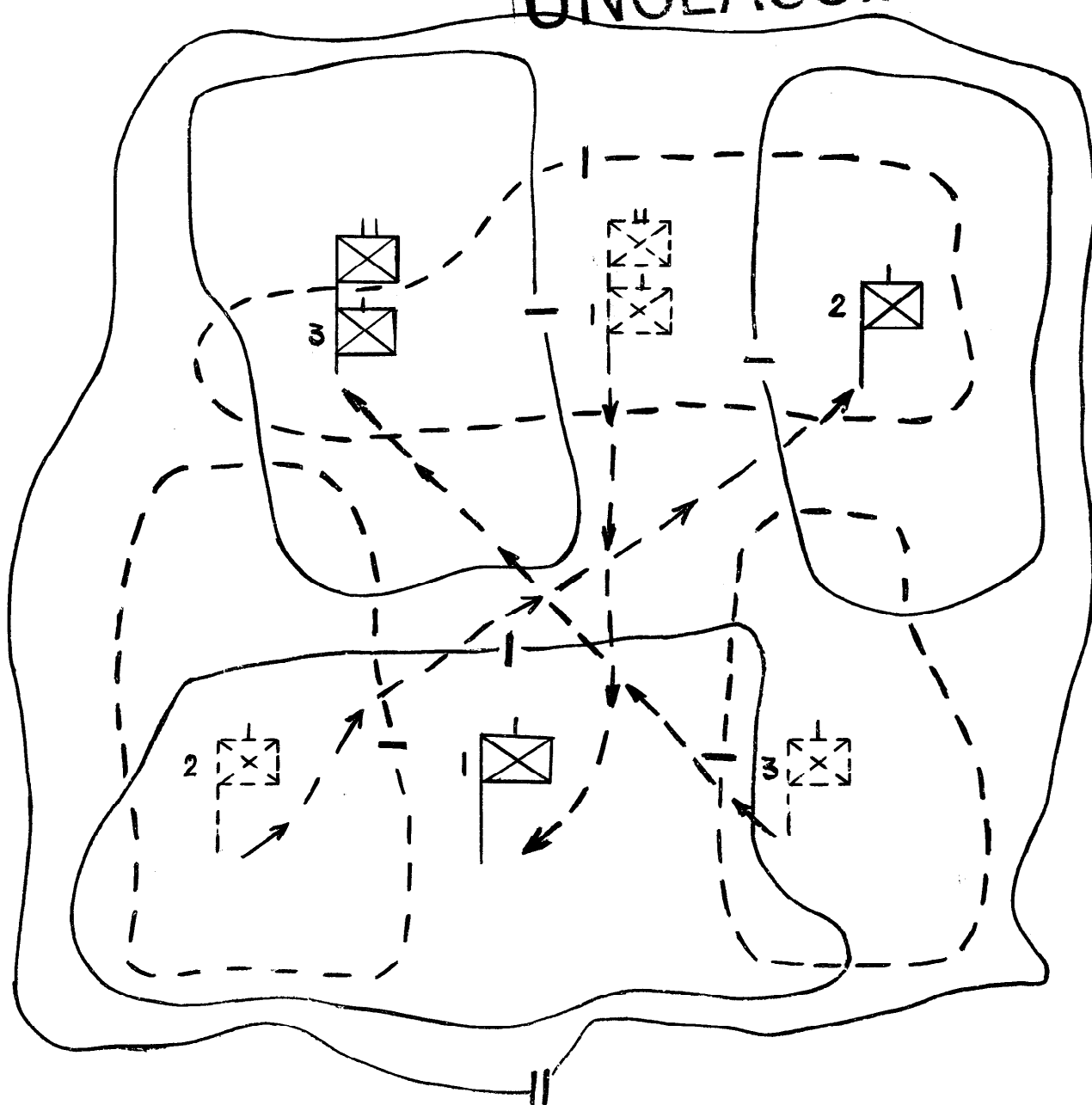
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BATTALION DISPERSES FOR SEARCHING

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D+2: Co. moves to new zone of action.

D+3: Disperses for searching.

D+4: Disperses for searching.

— — — Broken lines shows old positions.

————— Solid lines show new positions.

— — —> Route movement of Platoon transporting heavy equipment.

Incl 3

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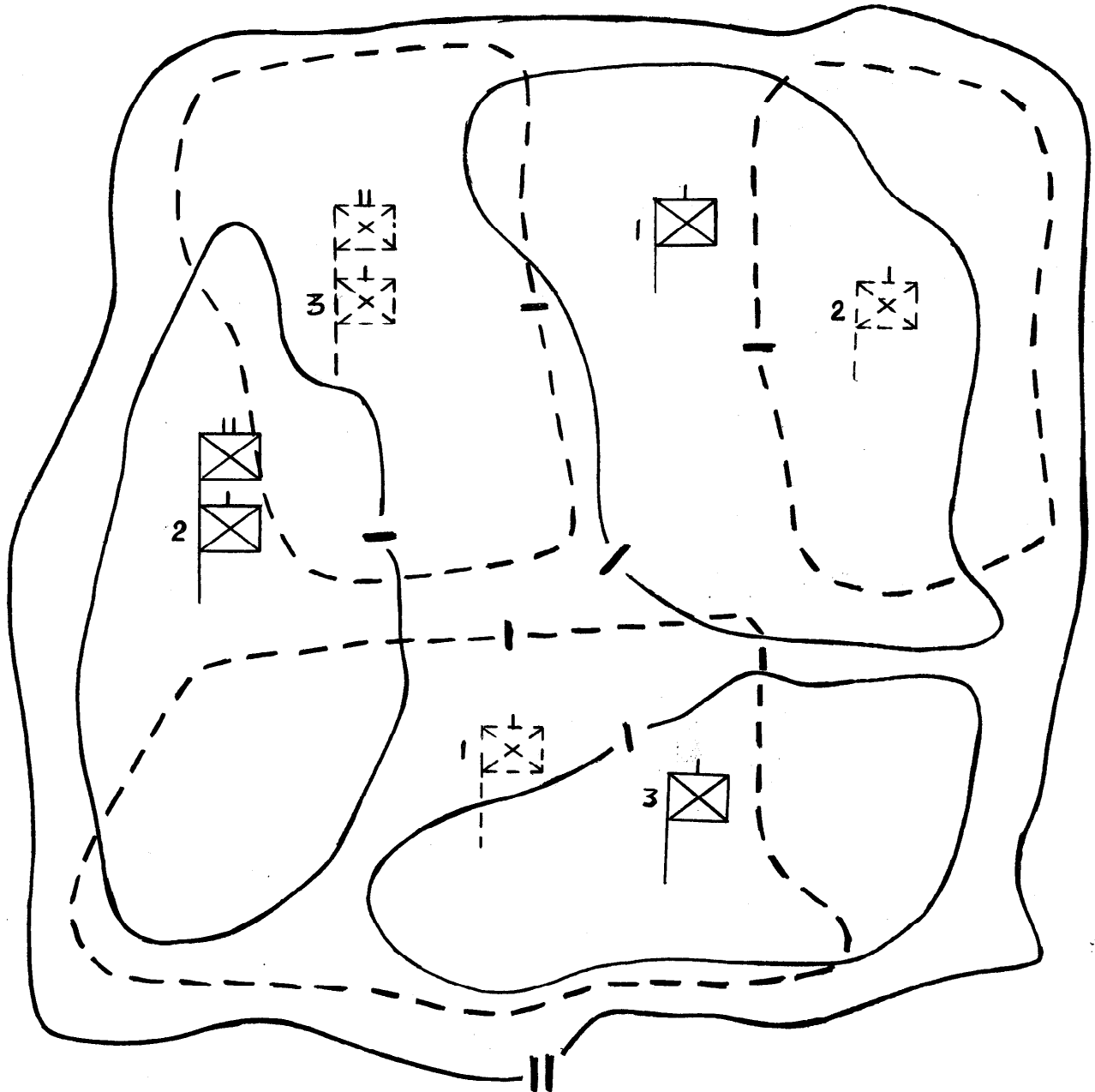
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BATTALION DISPERSES FOR SEARCHING

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D+5: Co. moves to new zone of action.
D+6: Disperses for searching.
D+7: MOP-UP.

Incl 4

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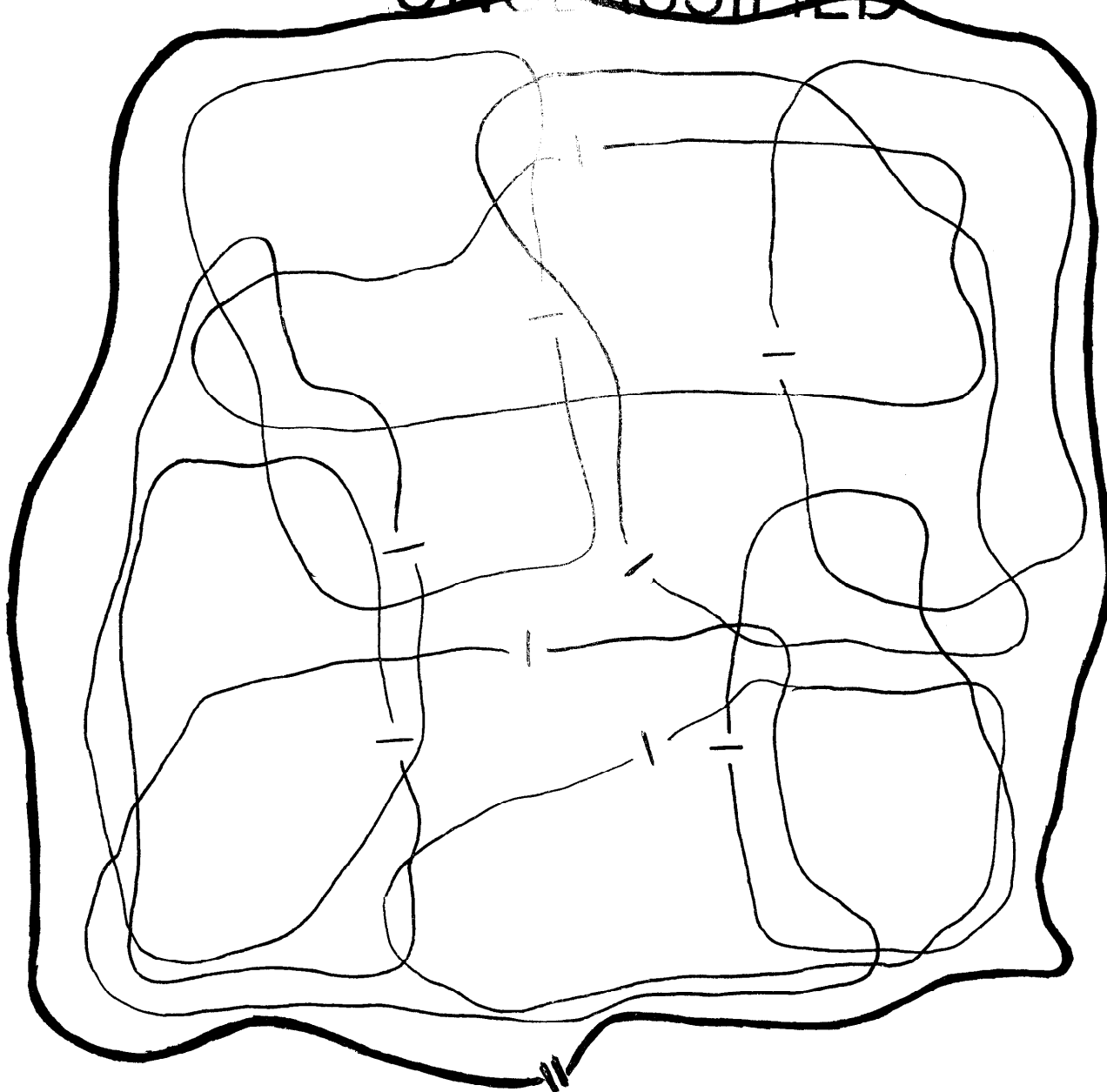
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ZONE OF ACTION OF BATTALION AFTER 8-DAY SEARCH

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D Day to D+7:

Incl 5



Searched area.

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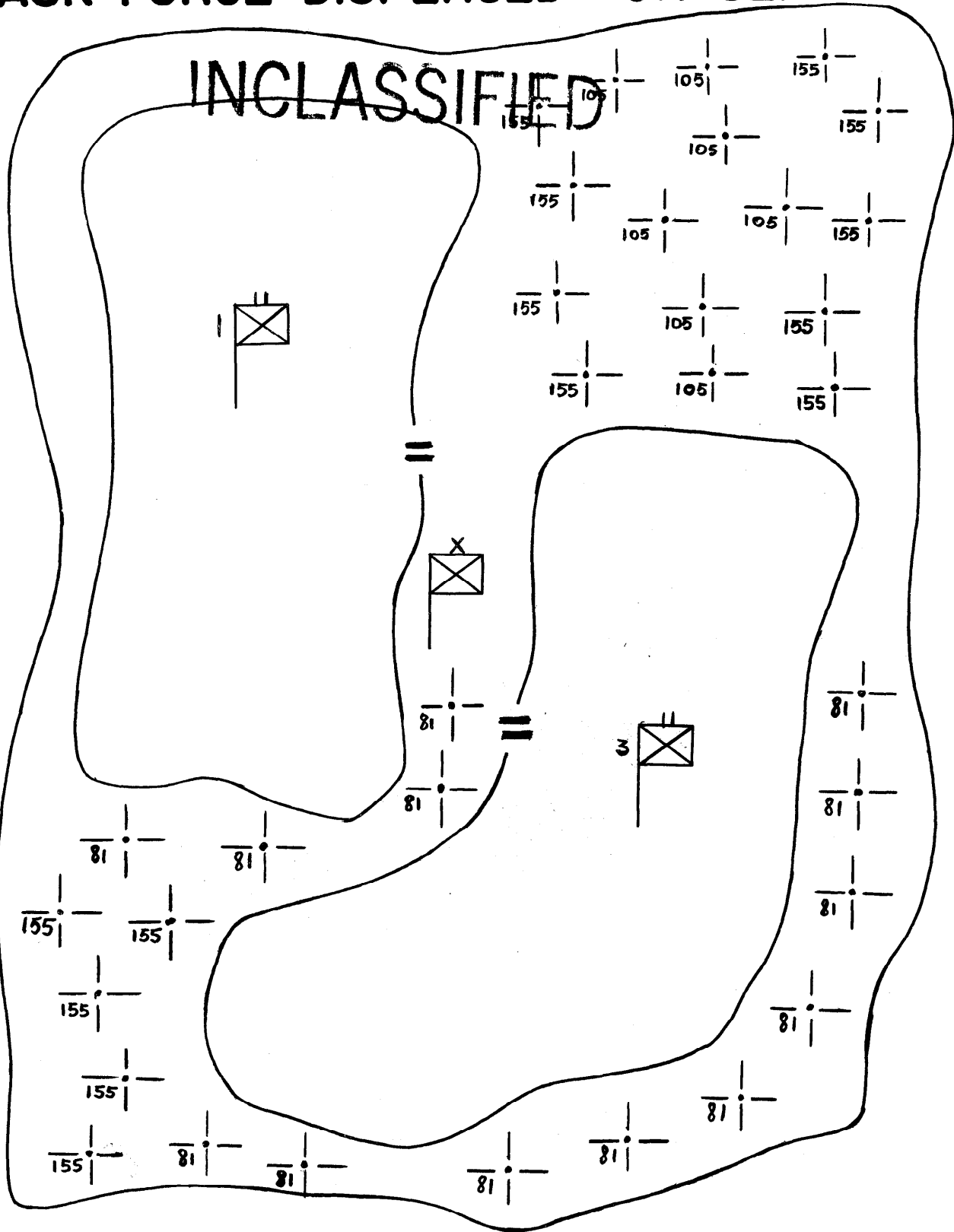
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TASK FORCE DISPERSED FOR SEARCHING



Incl 6

D Day: Move to zone of action.

D Day to D+7: Disperse for searching.

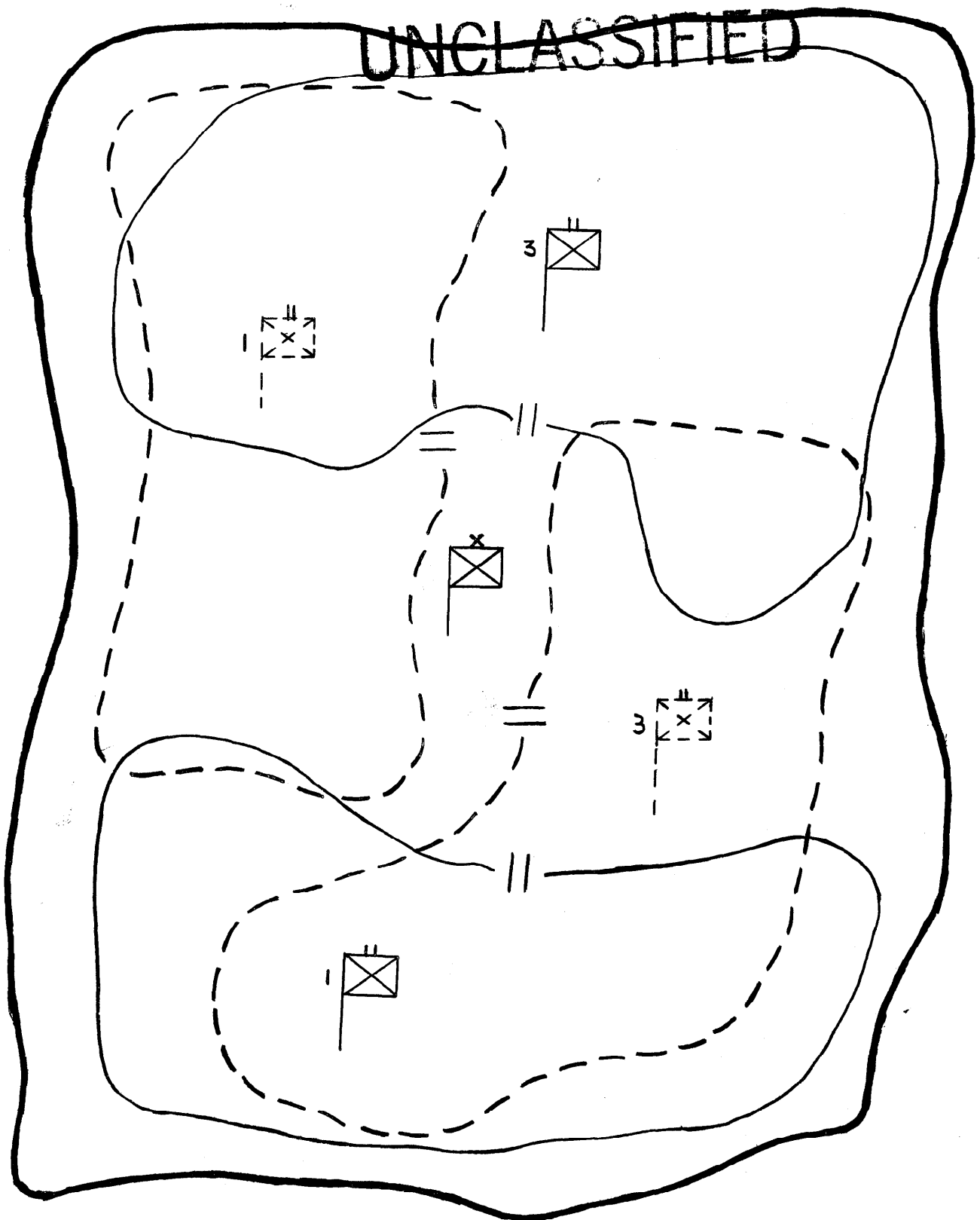
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TASK FORCE DISPERSED FOR SEARCHING

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Incl 7

D+8: Move to zone of action.
D+9 to D+16: Disperse for searching.

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